

'ANTICHRISTS' IN THE JOHANNINE LETTERS: THE BACKGROUND AND MEANING OF THE IDEA

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The cryptic figure of the 'Antichrist' has occupied the imagination of the entire two thousand years of ecclesiastical history. In the last three decades at least three major monographs have been published on the history of the concept. In 1981 the Jesuit scholar Vincent Miceli wrote a massive volume on the 'Antichrist', accompanied by the enthusiastic foreword of Malcolm Muggeridge.¹ Thirteen years later his pioneering work was followed by the critical study of Bernard McGinn, with the telling title: *Antichrist: The Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*.² Recently Kim Riddlebarger revisited McGinn's findings and interpreted them in a more friendly, evangelical framework.³ This is of course only the tip of the iceberg. On the popular level films like *Omen*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Antichrist*, *Hellboy*, *Megiddo*, and the *Left Behind* series reflect the appetite of both American fundamentalist church culture and a significant portion of the secular public that is indeed "fascinated with evil." In light of this, it can be a surprise for many of us that there are only four verses in the entire New Testament where the word 'antichrist' appears, and all four verses are found in the Epistles of John, two of them in the same passage!⁴ Are these verses related to the concept of an evil end-time ruler who will rule the earth through one world-government? Or should we understand John's concept independently from other biblical prophecies? Is it right to use the Johannine word 'antichrist' to denote a political leader who opposes the people of God before the Second Coming of Christ? In this study my aim is to look at these verses and answer two questions about them: 1. What is the background of the Johannine concept? 2. What is the meaning of the word 'antichrist'?

1. BACKGROUND

In 1 John, John mentions twice that the recipients of his letter were familiar with the concept of the 'antichrist'. In 2:18 he says, "Children, it is the last hour, and as *you have*

¹ Vincent P. Miceli, SJ, *The Antichrist* (New York: Roman Catholic Books, 1981).

² Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: The Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994).

³ Kim Riddlebarger, *The Man of Sin: Uncovering the Truth about the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2006).

⁴ 1Jn 2:18 "Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that *antichrist* is coming, so now many *antichrists* have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour." (ESV); 2:22 "Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the *antichrist*, he who denies the Father and the Son." (ESV); 4:3 "and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the *antichrist*, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already." (ESV); 2Jn 7 "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the *antichrist*." (ESV)

heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour." (ESV) In 4:3 he repeats this claim, "This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already." (ESV) B.B. Warfield rightly makes the comment, "If John had not himself told us that a doctrine of Antichrist was already current when he wrote, both the doctrine and the name might have been with great plausibility ascribed to him as their originator."⁵ But since John refers to a common knowledge between him and his readers, we must raise the question as to what kind of knowledge does John presuppose on the part of his readers? What is the background of the 'antichrist' belief and what are the possible sources for this belief?

In his study on messianism among Jews and Christians,⁶ William Horbury lists the two main options: the theme either originated in Christianity or in Judaism. Some modern scholars, like G. C. Jenks, C. E. Hill and L. J. Lietaert Peerbolte, contend that the figure of Antichrist is a *Christian* development. What John refers to is a Christian tradition without any precursors in Judaism. "In earlier years, by contrast, it had been considered originally Jewish by Wilhelm Bousset, Moritz Friedländer, Louis Ginzberg and Israel Lévi."⁷ Horbury himself is on this opinion. "Then, however, Paul Billerbeck (1926), concisely summarizing a wealth of material, urged that, despite appearances, there was virtually no contact in substance between ancient Jewish literature and the New Testament on Antichrist; in Jewish sources the messiah had political opponents, but the Christian Antichrist was a religious figure."⁸ Jenks (1991), Hill (1995), and Lietaert Peerbolte (1996) followed Billerbeck. In their opinion, "the expectation of an enemy specifically opposed to the messiah occurs among the earliest Christians, rather than among the non-Christian or pre-Christian Jews."⁹ "Pre-Christian traditions, it is urged, refer to an eschatological tyrant, a final attack by evil powers, or the accompanying false prophecy, rather than a messianic opponent who can properly be termed Antichrist."¹⁰ Horbury is not satisfied with this new scholarly consensus. It is true that the consensus has strong foundations. "Yet, just as Belial with horns now looms up hauntingly in Qumran texts (see 11Q Apocryphal Psalms, col. iv, lines 6-7), so it may be asked again, a hundred years after Bousset, whether Antichrist is not pre-Christian and Jewish as well as Christian."¹¹ When we try to identify the background of John's 'antichrists', we should therefore first determine whether the common knowledge that John appeals to is a Jewish or a Christian development.

⁵ Benjamin B. Warfield, "Antichrist" in John E. Meeter, ed. *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* Volume I. (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), 356.

⁶ William Horbury, *Messianism Among Jews and Christians: Twelve Biblical and Historical Studies* (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2003).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁸ *Ibid.* "More recently Stephan Heid, in a book finished in 1990, accepted that Bousset was fundamentally right. A contrast between Christian and Jewish sources, in some ways recalling that drawn by Billerbeck, has nevertheless returned to prominence." (*Ibid.*)

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

a. Jewish source?

On the surface level it looks obvious that the 'antichrist' theme is only characteristic of John. In 1921 B. B. Warfield noted, "The Old Testament tells us nothing of Anti-Messiah. Neither has been discovered in any of the fragments of pre-Christian Jewish literature which have come down to us."¹² Sixty years later, in light of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Raymond Brown can still write, "In the Bible the term occurs only in I John 2:18, 22; 4:3; II John 7. Neither it nor Antimesiah is found in the intertestamental literature, the Midrashim, or the Talmud."¹³ Even the apostolic fathers are more or less silent on this theme. "In the Apostolic Fathers it is found only in Polycarp, Philip. 7:1 ('Everyone who does not confess Jesus Christ to have come in the flesh is Antichrist'), a passage that seems to depend upon II John 7 and I John 4:2-3."¹⁴ Brown concludes, "Thus the Johannine School may have coined the term 'Antichrist' for a concept designated less vividly elsewhere."¹⁵ It is possible that "the term 'Antichrist,' peculiar to the Johannine Epistles in the NT, represents a convergence of various background factors in Judaism"¹⁶ These background factors might include 1. the Sea Monster, 2. the Satan or Angelic Adversary, 3. the Human Ruler Embodying Evil, 4. and the False Prophet.¹⁷ Warfield, on the other hand, would not connect these themes with the figure of the Johannine 'antichrists':

We read of Antichrist nowhere in the New Testament except in certain passages of the Epistles of John (1 John ii. 18, 22; iv. 3; 2 John 7). What is taught in these passages constitutes the whole New Testament doctrine of Antichrist. It is common, it is true, to connect with this doctrine what is said by our Lord of false Christs and false prophets; by Paul of the Man of Sin; by the Apocalypse of the Beasts which come up out of the deep and the sea. The warrant for labeling the composite photograph thus obtained with the name of Antichrist is not very apparent.¹⁸

Recently, McGinn and Horbury (and Riddlebarger, though he heavily relies on McGinn) argued for the Jewish origin of the Johannine 'antichrist' theme. McGinn admits that the earliest appearance of the word 'antichrist' is in 1 John.¹⁹ His explanation for this is rather simple: "The full-blown legend of Antichrist was born only when some Jews of the first century C.E. came to believe that the messiah had actually arrived in the person of Jesus of Nazareth... The roots of the Antichrist legend are thus firmly planted in the early church's developing views of Christ."²⁰ In his opinion this does not imply that the theme originated with Christianity. "While it would be anachronistic to speak of an Antichrist before some Jews in the middle of the

¹² Warfield, 356.

¹³ Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John* [The Anchor Bible] (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 333.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 333-6.

¹⁸ Warfield, 356.

¹⁹ McGinn, 4.

²⁰ Ibid, 3.

first century C.E. came to identify Jesus of Nazareth as the messiah or Christ (the anointed one), earlier Jewish views of apocalyptic adversaries form a necessary part of the background to the Antichrist legend."²¹ Antichrist is "the false messiah, the 'pseudo-Christ'."²² This false messiah is prefigured in Daniel's vision of the Final Tyrant ("It culminates in an account of the career of Antiochus IV. Epiphanes, portrayed as a 'little horn.'"),²³ the appearance of Belial ("The most important of these figures epitomizing apocalyptic opposition is the evil angel Belial (alternatively Beliar), who appears in a number of writings of late Second Temple Judaism."²⁴

Riddlebarger names the same potential sources as a background for the Johannine 'antichrist' theme, and a few more: Beliar of the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs; Belial of Judges 19:22 and 20:13, 2 Corinthians 6:15, and Qumran; the Little Horn in Daniel ("likely the first direct prophetic reference to the coming Antichrist");²⁵ Gog and Magog of Ezekiel; and the recurring redemptive-historical theme represented by Nimrod, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, and IV. Antiochus Epiphanes.²⁶

The most extensive recent argument for the Jewish source of the 'antichrist' theme comes from William Horbury, who stands in the scholarly tradition of W. Bousset. Horbury begins his case by admitting the difficulty of the attempt to prove the Jewish origin of the theme. There are Jewish sources that the historians must take into account,

Nevertheless, even as early as this, the possibility of Christian influence on Jewish messianic hopes cannot be ruled out. Jewish notions of an opponent of the messiah are commonly thought to be less well attested, or not attested at all, at the beginning of the Roman imperial period. The earliest full descriptions of Antichrist, identified by that name, are Christian, and they come from sources of the second and third centuries – Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and the exegetical works attributed to Hippolytus. Moreover, the first attestations of the Greek word *antichristos* are Christian, being found – here without fuller explanation or description – in two of the three Johannine epistles of the New Testament, probably written towards the end of the first century (1 John 2.18, 22; 4.3; 2 John 7).²⁷

The historian must admit that "Antichrist, then, was certainly an important early *Christian* conception."²⁸ "Nevertheless, the Christian references to him include much to suggest that, like the figure of the Christ or messiah, he derived from pre-Christian Judaism in its Greek and Roman setting."²⁹ The fact that 'antichrist' is not mentioned in pre-Christian documents does not imply that there was no such theme among the Jews.

²¹ Ibid, 9.

²² Ibid, 5.

²³ Ibid, 26.

²⁴ Ibid, 28. When he mentions the writings of late Second Temple Judaism, McGinn especially thinks of the Qumran scrolls.

²⁵ Riddlebarger, 50.

²⁶ Ibid, 37-60.

²⁷ Horbury, 332.

²⁸ Ibid, 332.

²⁹ Ibid.

Indeed, Second Temple Judaism is permeated by the theme of a person who sets himself against God's anointed one.

This view is consonant with the lack of explanation of the Antichrist figure in the New Testament, and it is supported by the Jewish sources from the end of the Second Temple period which describe an Antichrist-like figure without using this term, naming him rather as the wicked one, Gog, or Beliar. These sources can be said to bridge the gap between the biblical passages already noted, which attest the expectations of messianic victory and of a final arch-enemy of Israel without explicit interconnection between them, and the rabbinic passages also noted above, which suggest that the notion of a great messianic opponent was familiar under the Jewish patriarchate in the third century."³⁰

Since the word Χριστός, used both in John and elsewhere in the New Testament, was taken over from the contemporary Jewish vocabulary, the same may well have happened with the word ἀντίχριστος.³¹ "Even the technical term 'Antichrist', therefore, is by no means clearly of Christian origin."³² Horbury suggests that we should revisit Bousset's arguments for Jewish origin in light of three recurring themes in Second Temple Judaism.³³ The first theme is the "wicked one" of Isaiah 11. This has strong connections with the variations on the Gog-Magog and Beliar/Belial themes. "The great foe to be slain by the messiah was therefore a familiar figure in Jewish biblical interpretation of the Second Temple period. His execution was central in a widely attested scene of messianic judgment, which was shaped especially by exegesis of Isa. 11.4."³⁴ The second recurring theme is the rebellion of the nations against God's anointed one in Psalm 2. The early rabbinic tradition saw an anti-messiah in this psalm. "This messianic psalm could indeed be called 'the chapter of Gog and Magog'."³⁵ The third loosely related theme is the myth of the Titans, familiar to Hellenized Jews like Philo.³⁶ These themes might substantiate the view that the figure of 'antichrist' was well-known to a Jewish audience. Horbury therefore concludes, "Despite the contrast between Christian and Jewish views drawn in much study of Antichrist, Christian notions of Antichrist derived from Jewish tradition."³⁷

What shall we conclude? Which scholarly tradition is right? Is the 'antichrist' theme a Jewish or a Christian invention? Strictly speaking, McGinn and Horbury do not question the fact that the wording and the specific concept are closely related to the appearance of the Christ. No evidence has been found for the use of the same or even of

³⁰ Ibid, 332-3.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ "Bousset urged that an 'antichrist myth' was also known at the time of the New Testament writers. Criticism has fastened on his inferences from Christian evidence, including relatively late material, to a connected myth envisaged as in circulation at the time of Christian origins; but perhaps too little credit has been given to the support for his view found in Jewish sources of the Second Temple period, notably the Septuagint, the Sybilline Oracles, 2 Esdras and 2 Baruch, and the Qumran texts." (Ibid, 334)

³⁴ Ibid, 342.

³⁵ Ibid, 331.

³⁶ Ibid, 343-8.

³⁷ Ibid, 347.

a similar word in Judaism. (Not even in early Christian literature!)³⁸ On the other hand, it is possible that certain themes did in fact affect the Christian views on an eschatological arch-enemy of Christ. These theme can be found in one of Paul's letters (the 'man of sin' in 2 Thessalonians) and in the book of Revelation (the Beasts of chapter 13). The evidence is not conclusive, though, and it is questionable whether this has anything to do with the Epistles of John. Even if we could prove that Second Temple Judaism functions as a background for the apocalyptic 'man of sin', and the Beasts of Revelation, it is another step to justify a connection between these figures and the "antichrists" that John talks about.

If we follow Warfield and the scholarly tradition of G. C. Jenks, C. E. Hill and L. J. Lietaert Peerbolte instead, and claim that 'antichrist' is a Christian concept without Jewish antecedents, we have three further options to identify the shared background knowledge that John builds his concept of the 'antichrist' on. It can be a Synoptic source, a Pauline source, or a popular legend. Naturally, even if one presupposes an ultimate Jewish source, one can see any of these options as a mediating stage between the Judaic and Johannine concepts.³⁹

b. Synoptic source?

Riddlebarger talks about the possibility of a Synoptic source. "John's description of these individuals, whom he calls 'antichrists,' raises the question as to whether the term *Antichrist* is connected to the 'false Christs' mentioned by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22). A number of writers believe this connection to be fairly obvious."⁴⁰ Three pages later Riddlebarger makes it clear that he himself accepts it. "John's antichrists are no doubt referring to the same or similar phenomena as the false christs predicted by Jesus (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22)."⁴¹ What does Jesus say in those verses? Mt 24:24 and Mk 13:22 are almost verbatim the same:

Mt 24:24 For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. (ESV)⁴²

Mk 13:22 For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. (ESV)⁴³

³⁸ As I noted earlier, the only appearance of the word in the writings of the apostolic fathers is in Polycarp's letter to the Philippians, but even that quotation clearly depends upon John's usage.

³⁹ Riddlebarger, for example, accepts the Jewish source theory of McGinn, but also argues for a Synoptic and a Pauline connection.

⁴⁰ Riddlebarger, 79. In footnote 5 he says, "See Kauder, "Antichrist," 1:125; L. J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *The Antecedents of Antichrist: A Traditio-Historical Study of the Earliest Christian Views on Eschatological Opponents* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), 102."

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 82.

⁴² ἐγερθήσονται γὰρ ψευδόχριστοι καὶ ψευδοπροφῆται καὶ δώσουσιν σημεῖα μεγάλα καὶ τέρατα ὥστε πλανῆσαι, εἰ δυνατόν, καὶ τοὺς ἐκλεκτούς.

⁴³ ἐγερθήσονται γὰρ ψευδόχριστοι καὶ ψευδοπροφῆται καὶ δώσουσιν σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα πρὸς τὸ ἀποπλανᾶν, εἰ δυνατόν, τοὺς ἐκλεκτούς.

Jesus prophesies that before his second coming, “in those days,” false christs (ψευδόχριστοι) and false prophets (ψευδοπροφήται) will come who will perform signs and wonders and will lead potentially even the elect away (πλανήσαί πρὸς τὸ ἀποπλανᾶν). The similarities between Jesus` words and John`s words are striking. Although John speaks about ἀντίχριστοι and Jesus talks about ψευδόχριστοι, both use the word ψευδοπροφήται in connection with their “non-christs” (cf. 1 John 4:1-3), both talk about the last days (hour) of the age, and both talk about the goal of these “non-christs” as leading astray.⁴⁴ Brown notes⁴⁵ that even the wording of 1 John 2:18 and Mark 13:6 is similar: “Many will come (πολλοὶ ἐλεύσονται) in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray.” (ESV); “you have heard that antichrist is coming (ἔρχεται) ... so now many antichrists have come (ESV) (ἀντίχριστοι πολλοὶ γέγονασιν).”

On the basis of these similarities Riddlebarger claims, “John`s multitude of antichrists can be directly related to the warnings that our Lord gives us about false christs – false teachers who would be characteristic, in part, of the ‘last days’ (see Mark 13:21-23).”⁴⁶ John`s discussion of the ‘antichrists’ focuses on false teaching, deception, lie, denial of the truth about Jesus, and not on political rule and oppression, just like Jesus` words on the false christs and false prophets. This connection is also supported by the fact that when Polycarp, disciple of John, later alluded to John`s teaching on the ‘antichrists’, he called these false teachers ψευδαδελφοί, and their teaching ψευδοδιδασκαλία (Phil 7:1), in harmony with Jesus` repeated use of the adjective ψευδο. We will come back to this point when we discuss the *meaning* of the Johannine word ‘antichrist’.

Overall, this interpretation has some merit. First, there is a demonstrable lexical connection between the synoptic teaching and John`s words. Second, John⁴⁷ was certainly familiar with Jesus` teaching, since he was present when they were uttered. Third, John`s audience could similarly know about the prophecy of Jesus, because the synoptic gospels had been written by the time 1 John was sent to them. And fourth, the content of the teachings of Jesus have much closer connections to the content of the teachings of John than any other potential sources.

c. Pauline source?

The second possible Christian source for the Johannine ‘antichrist’ theme is Paul`s first letter to the Thessalonians. In 2:9-10 he writes, “The coming of *the lawless one* is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders,¹⁰ and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” (ESV) Is this lawless one the ‘Antichrist’ John refers to – at least the one that his

⁴⁴ 1John 2:26 “I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you.” (ESV); Ταῦτα ἔγραψα ὑμῖν περὶ τῶν πλανῶντων ὑμᾶς.

⁴⁵ Brown, 333.

⁴⁶ Riddlebarger, 85. Also, on page 86, “John`s antichrists are very likely connected to the false christs mentioned by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22).”

⁴⁷ Contrary to Brown and many others, my position is that John, the disciple of Jesus, is the author of 1 and 2 John.

hearers had heard would come? This is the view of Miceli, among others.⁴⁸ “From the writings of St. Paul, the readers of St. John’s letters would already have known about the doctrine of the coming of the Antichrist. St. Paul had already, in equally vivid language, described more fully that future super-Antichrist.”⁴⁹ By the time John wrote his letters, Paul’s letters had been circulated in the churches throughout the Roman Empire. John’s readers could very well be familiar with Paul’s ideas. According to Miceli, the two themes also fit each other.

As to the time of that ‘man of sin’s’ coming, St. John places that arrival at ‘the last hour.’ But we know that for St. John ‘the last times,’ ‘the last hour’ of salvation history is the time extending from the Resurrection of Christ to His Second Coming. That is why St. John also mentions that already many antichrists having arisen letting us know that it *is* the last hour. In a sense ‘he (the great Antichrist) is already in the world’ in the persons of his type, his precursors.⁵⁰

When we ponder the possibility that John could allude to Paul’s ‘man of sin’ or ‘lawless one’, we might find some support for this view in the way Irenaeus uses the word antichrist in the late second century. When Irenaeus mentions the word and connects the idea to an apostle, each time he connects it to the apostle Paul.⁵¹ This seems to indicate that the church father identified the ‘antichrist’ with the ‘lawless one’. However, it is interesting that he never connects the word ‘antichrist’ to John’s writings, a fact which might point to the direction that the word ‘antichrist’ gained a new meaning by this time, a meaning that fits Paul’s ‘man of sin’ much better than John’s ‘antichrists’.

Those who hold to a Pauline source for the Johannine ‘antichrist’ theme can equally hold to an original Jewish source as well. After establishing his point of a Pauline origin for John’s ‘antichrists’, Miceli asks the question, “From what source or sources did St. Paul receive his teaching on the Antichrist?”⁵² It seems that the Jesuit Miceli encounters an interesting dilemma about ecclesiastical loyalty here:

Several Protestant writers have advanced the view that St. Paul was expressing his own personal conviction based on the Jewish tradition and the imagery of the Prophets Daniel and Ezekiel. Dollinger’s opinion is that St. Paul is expressing the impression produced on the early Church by the eschatological teaching of Jesus Christ. However, Catholic writers throughout the ages have generally taught that St. Paul uttered a prophecy concerning the ‘man of sin’ which he received from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Church has traditionally adhered to this interpretation.⁵³

⁴⁸ Schnackenburg also argues for a connection between Paul’s letters and the Johannine concept. (Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Crossroad, 1992, 135-9.)

⁴⁹ Miceli, 32.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III, VI/5; Book IV, XXIX/1; Book V, XXV/1. In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. (Edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1953).

⁵² Miceli, 34.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Though being Catholic, Miceli, after weighing the evidence, agrees with those who see the prophecies of Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Joel, and Micah as precursors to the Antichrist theme of Paul – and thus of John.⁵⁴

There are elements in the “Pauline source” view that make it look plausible. This view can easily explain why John could refer to a common knowledge about the coming of (an) antichrist. John speaks of one antichrist first (in the singular), which he then corrects to the plural (many antichrists). If he is referring to Paul’s ‘man of sin’, the singular ‘antichrist’ has a very natural explanation.⁵⁵ However, we face the same problem here as with the supposed Jewish sources. John’s antichrists are not rulers like the ‘man of sin,’ but false teachers. Paul does not use the word ‘antichrist’, and John does not give any hint that he would be alluding to Paul’s teaching. The lexical connections that we can see between John and the Synoptic Gospels are non-existent in this supposed nexus.

d. Popular legend?

In his essay on the ‘Antichrist’, Warfield came up with an ingenious view concerning the shared knowledge that John and his audience had in common. “John does not tell us in what quarter the doctrine of Antichrist to which he alludes was current. Nor does his allusion enable us to form any very full conception of the doctrine that was current. We learn merely that there were people who declared ‘Antichrist is coming!’ ...as to who were asserting ‘Antichrist is coming!’ John leaves us completely in the dark.”⁵⁶ The shared knowledge that John makes a reference to is therefore not a biblical or apostolic teaching.

It appears far more probable, however, that John is adducing not an item of Christian teaching, but only a current legend – Christian or other – in which he recognizes an element of truth and isolates it for the benefit of his readers. In that case we may understand him less as expounding than as openly correcting it – somewhat as, in the closing paragraph of his Gospel, he corrects another saying of similar bearing which was in circulation among the brethren, to the effect that he himself should not die but should tarry till the Lord comes.”⁵⁷

This is an interesting view which probably deserves more attention than it has received. Warfield’s position at least cautions us that theologians⁵⁸ often make too hasty connections among scriptural teachings which vaguely resemble each other, to make a “composite photograph.”⁵⁹ But Warfield probably goes too far. In light of the parallels

⁵⁴ Ibid, 34-43.

⁵⁵ Although I will argue below that the anarthrous singular noun is to be understood as *qualitative* and not as definite.

⁵⁶ Warfield, 357.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Even commentators like Kruse, who in a tabular form presents the ‘composite picture’ Warfield warns about. (Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*. PNTC. Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans; Leicester, England, Apollos, 2000, 99.)

⁵⁹ “In the strictest sense, then, Warfield is correct, and we would be wise to heed his caution. John’s heretical antichrists are not the same thing as the beast of Revelation... Therefore we must not simply equate John’s antichrist

with the Synoptic verses, it is hard to deny the connection between the words of Jesus and the words of John. The ‘antichrist’ that John’s readers heard was coming naturally connects to the false christs that Jesus had promised would be coming. Of all the options, the most plausible one is therefore that which sees John’s ‘antichrists’ as a fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy about false christs and false prophets. Even if there had been Jewish sources for the larger ‘antichrist’ theme of the Christian church tradition, the Johannine ‘antichrists’ do not seem to relate to that larger theme, or if they do, it is a rather remote relationship.

2. MEANING

So far we have seen that the ‘antichrists’ in 1-2 John are false teachers, fulfilling Jesus’ prophecy about false christs and false prophets who would lead people astray, deceiving potentially even the elect. They are not political figures but present or ex-members of Christian congregations. Is this a plausible interpretation in light of the Johannine texts themselves? Let us take a closer look at the word ‘antichrist’ and the contexts in which the word appears.

a. The word ‘antichrist’

What is the meaning of the word ‘antichrist’ in John’s epistles? The word ἀντίχριστος consists of a preposition and a noun. Χριστός (Christ or christ) is the Greek word for the Messiah, inseparably connected to Jesus in the New Testament, but its meaning is simply “anointed one.” According to Daniel Wallace, the preposition ἀντι has two basic meanings, and one debatable one. It can express *substitution* (instead of, in place of); it can express *exchange/equivalence* (for, as, in the place of); and it might also express *cause* (because of), though this last category is debated. “The notions of *exchange* and *substitution* are quite similar, often blending into each other.”⁶⁰ If we put the two parts of the word together, the meaning we get is most naturally: *someone in place of a christ/Christ*. In other words: *a false christ/Christ*. This is in harmony with the view that John connects this theme with the false christs (ψευδόχριστοι) that Jesus talked about.⁶¹ The word itself does not decide whether ‘antichrists’ put themselves in the place of *Jesus Christ* or simply in place of *the anointed teachers* of the church in a general sense. The context in 1 John 2, in which John speaks of an ‘anointing’ that all believers receive, and

imagery to the beast of Revelation to form what Warfield describes as a ‘composite photograph’ without sound theological justification. But the final manifestation of the beast and false prophet (when tied to Paul’s Man of Sin) seems to indicate that John’s series of antichrists (whether John here envisions this or not) will indeed give way to a final end-times persecutor of the people of God, in which the state uses its powers to impose the false teaching described by John on the people of God.” (Riddlebarger, 87)

⁶⁰ Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 364.

⁶¹ Yarbrough links the Johannine ‘antichrist’ theme with Jesus’ warnings, but he understands the term ‘antichrist’ “in the sense of opponent of, rather than replacement of.” (Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008, 144.)

which anointing teaches them (2:20, 27), makes the latter interpretation more likely. The christs are anointed teachers, spokesmen of God, people who declare God's will to us. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the parallel word for both ἀντίχριστοι and ψευδοχριστοι is the word ψευδοπροφήται both in the Synoptic gospels and in 1 John.⁶² This parallel word can only mean a more general kind of teacher, one who speaks truth or falsehood in the name of God. These considerations point in the direction that when John speaks of false christs, he essentially means by that people who speak in the name of God but who are false teachers. They are not necessarily saying that they are Jesus *himself*, but they say that they are *like* Jesus in the sense that they are 'anointed ones' who can teach the people truly.⁶³

Why does John use the word 'antichrist' in the singular when he refers to him the first time in 1 John 2:18? "Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that *antichrist is coming*, so now many antichrists have come." (ESV) Although the English does not use the definite article, our sense from the use of the singular is that John has a specific person in mind (or at least says that his readers have a specific person in mind). The Greek grammar is more ambiguous. It is true that "Codex Alexandrinus and the Byzantine tradition insert a definite article",⁶⁴ but the most reliable manuscripts have an anarthrous 'antichrist' (ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἀντίχριστος ἔρχεται). Anarthrous nouns can be *indefinite, qualitative, or definite*.⁶⁵ The rule of thumb is that when a noun has an article, it must be definite, when it is anarthrous, it can still be definite, but not necessarily so.⁶⁶ In my opinion the anarthrous ἀντίχριστος here is *qualitative*.

A qualitative noun places the stress on quality, nature, or essence. It does not merely indicate membership in a class of which there are other members (such as an indefinite noun), nor does it stress individual identity (such as a definite noun). It is akin to a generic noun in that it focuses on the *kind*. Further, like a generic, *it emphasizes class traits*. Yet, unlike generic nouns, a qualitative noun often has in view one individual rather than the class as a whole.⁶⁷

If ἀντίχριστος in 1Jn 2:18 is qualitative, then it refers to a member of a class. Not one particular member is in view, and not simply the class, but *a quality represented in one man*. If this is the correct meaning, the *many* antichrists (ἀντίχριστοι πολλοί) is not a contradiction of a definite meaning (one particular antichrist), but a perfectly fitting fulfillment of the idea that a certain class of man (antichrist) will come. We can paraphrase John's words: "You have heard that a certain quality of man would come

⁶² John Stott questions this argument: "if John had meant a 'false' Christ, he probably would have used the term *pseudochristos* as he does *pseudoprophetes* in 4:1." (John Stott, *The Letters of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1964, 1992, 109). However, Stott does not ponder the possibility that the idea of substitution does not necessarily entail that they would claim to stand in the place of Jesus Christ as pretenders.

⁶³ Cf. Mt 24:5 "For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray." (ESV)

⁶⁴ Brown, 332.

⁶⁵ Wallace, 243-4.

⁶⁶ "It is not necessary for a noun to have the article in order for it to be definite. But conversely, a noun *cannot* be indefinite when it has the article. Thus it *may* be definite without the article, and it *must* be definite with the article." (Ibid, 243.)

⁶⁷ Ibid, 244.

(namely: antichrist, false christs). They came indeed!" John's point is that the false christs (that quality of man) that Jesus had talked about came in multitudes!⁶⁸

b. The meaning of the word in context

Let us examine the individual occurrences of the word in their particular contexts. The first verse is 1 John 2:18: "Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that *antichrist* is coming, so now many *antichrists* have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour." (ESV) With regard to the meaning of the expression "last hour" Warfield says, "For the 'last hour' means just the Messianic period, the period after the Messiah has come. We may call it, with reference to the true coming of our Lord, the inter-Adventual period. Of course there could be no Antichrist until this 'last hour' had come. How could there be an Antichrist before there was a Christ?"⁶⁹ The presence of these false anointed ones proves that Jesus' Second Coming could take place at any time. Jesus promised that there would be false christs before he comes back. John says that the false christs are already among us, they are the false teachers who deny the essentials of the apostolic message. John explains this in verse 22: "Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the *antichrist*, he who denies the Father and the Son." (ESV)

This same characteristic feature is emphasized in the two remaining occurrences of the word. In 4:3 John says, "and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the *antichrist*, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already." (ESV) The de-personification of the 'antichrist' into the "spirit of antichrist" (τὸ τοῦ ἀντιχρίστου) strengthens my argument that the anarthrous ἀντίχριστος in 2:18 is qualitative not definite. The emphasis is not on one particular person, but a certain class of people: false teachers who deny that Jesus is the Christ, and that he has a special filial relationship to the Father. As Gary Burge put it, "The term antichrist... may refer to a single person or more likely it refers to a disposition of hostility to the things of Christ and a denial of his sonship."⁷⁰

2 John 7 makes the problem even more transparent: "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the *antichrist*." (ESV) The false teachers in mind deny the incarnation of Jesus Christ.⁷¹ They are deceivers, as Jesus predicted. They are liars, not rulers (1 John 2:22). They put themselves in the position of God's anointed spokesmen, but lead people astray.

⁶⁸ According to Miceli "St. John speaks of several Antichrists and he carefully distinguishes between the many and the one principle agent." (Miceli, 31) I do not believe John distinguishes between them, I think he understands the 'many' as the fulfillment of the *quality* that is coming.

⁶⁹ Warfield, 359.

⁷⁰ Gary M. Burge, *The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 125.

⁷¹ "In one word, 'Antichrist' meant for John just denial of what we should call the doctrine, or let us rather say the fact, of the Incarnation. By whatever process it had been brought about, 'Christ' had come to denote for John the Divine Nature of our Lord, and so far to be synonymous with 'Son of God.'" (Ibid, 360) "Whosoever, says John, takes up this attitude toward Jesus is Antichrist." (Ibid, 361)

CONCLUSION

Both the background of the 'antichrist' theme and the meaning of the word point in the direction that we should not seek an end-time political ruler in John's epistles. The source of the 'antichrist' theme is most likely the prediction of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels that false anointed ones will come who try to deceive even the elect. Its meaning is a teacher who falsely claims that he speaks in the name of God and thus leads his hearers astray.

We can therefore agree with Warfield's conclusion: "Antichrist is not a future but a present phenomenon; not a thing to be looked forward to in nameless dread, but a thing to be courageously met in our everyday living. John makes this assertion with the utmost emphasis (iv. 3)."⁷² Warfield goes so far as to say, "He not only, however, dismisses Antichrist from the future; he deprives him of his individuality."⁷³ This might sound going a little too far, since John sees these false teachers as real people. Warfield's point however is that we should not see these antichrists as somehow the forerunners of the Great Antichrist who will be a political figure at the end of the age. "We may say, no doubt, that they embody the spirit of Antichrist; but not as if they prepared the way for its subsequent concentration in a single baleful figure, but as superseding that figure altogether and taking the place which had been assigned to it."⁷⁴ The antichrists have been in our midst since the first century. Are very ready to meet them in our own context, as we are getting closer and closer to the end of this rather longish "last hour"? That is the main question of the Johannine 'antichrist' theme.

⁷² Ibid, 358.

⁷³ Ibid, 359. Riddlebarger might have Warfield in mind when he says, "Some have advocated that John is correcting an earlier tradition in which antichrist was seen as a supernatural opponent. John's goal here, it is argued, is to 'depersonalize' Antichrist, removing the need for undue speculation." (Riddlebarger, 80) Riddlebarger's position is not far from Warfield at this point. "Throughout his first two Epistles, John makes three primary points about Antichrist. First, John tells us that antichrist is already present when he writes his first Epistle. Second, he says that there are many antichrists, not just one. Therefore antichrist is not a specific individual but a class of false teachers who deny that Jesus has come in the flesh. 'Who is the liar' It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist – he denies the Father and the Son" (1 John 2:22). Third, John tells us that antichrist may not even be an individual person or persons at all. Instead, antichrist may represent a system of heretical thought, specifically the denial that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh." (Riddlebarger, 79-80)

⁷⁴ Warfield, 360.

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The first title in Zondervan's new, eight-volume Biblical Theology of the New Testament series, this landmark textbook by leading Johannine scholar Andreas Köstenberger thoroughly explores John's Gospel and letters and relates them to the rest of the New Testament and the Bible as a whole. This is by far the most comprehensive treatment of John's writings available and makes an ideal college- or seminary-level text. Date uploaded: Nov 20, 2009. Alternative Title: Johannine Letters. Letters of John, three New Testament writings, all composed sometime around ad 100 and traditionally attributed to John the Evangelist, son of Zebedee and disciple of Jesus. The author of the first letter is not identified, but the writer of the second and third calls himself "presbyter" (elder). The second and third letters are closely akin to the first in language and ideas. The second exhorts a church, fancifully called "the elect lady and her children," to boycott heretics who deny the reality of the incarnation. Scriptures comprise a large part of the literature of the world. They vary greatly in form, volume, age, and degree of sacredness; but their common attribute is that their words are regarded by the devout as sacred. Sacred words!